



## **Constance A. Morella** **(1931- )**

***First Montgomery County woman elected to the U.S. Congress***

Constance Albanese Morella was born in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, in 1931. After graduating from Somerville High School in 1948, she attended Boston University where she received her B.A. in 1954. She married Anthony C. Morella and moved to the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. Morella attended American University in Washington D.C., receiving a M.A. in English in 1967. Morella joined the faculty of Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, in 1970 teaching English and Philosophy. She remained an English professor until 1986.

In 1972, Morella became a founding member of the newly created Montgomery County Commission for Women, serving as its second President from 1973 to 1974. During her term she testified for equal access in education, housing, and employment. She also became active in the League of Women Voters. In 1974, Morella ran for one of the three legislative seats from the 16th District in Bethesda, but lost. In 1978, she ran again and received more votes than her three incumbent opponents. Morella served in the Maryland House of Delegates for eight years before her election as the first woman from Montgomery County to serve in the U.S. Congress in 1986.

During her eight terms in the U.S. Congress, Morella initiated legislation concerned with domestic violence, child support, the elderly, environmental protection, health care reform, and human rights. Morella was instrumental in convincing Governor Schaefer to review the cases of several Maryland women imprisoned for killing or attacking their abusers. She also encouraged Governor Schaefer to initiate legislation to allow expert testimony on battered women's syndrome to be heard in Maryland courts. In addition, Morella introduced several pieces of federal legislation, including the Battered Women's Testimony Act, authorizing funds to assist indigent battered women to obtain expert witnesses, and the Judicial Training Act, authorizing funding for programs to educate judges about domestic violence and to review child custody decisions involving domestic violence. Both bills were passed by Congress in 1992 and are now public law. Her legislation to expand the Violence Against Women Act was signed into law. This legislation is the strongest commitment that Congress has ever made to fighting domestic violence and sexual assault.

Morella established herself as a leader and advocate for increased research on women's health. She sponsored legislation to increase research on HIV/AIDS in women and to increase access to preventive services for women. She introduced a bill to increase research on alcoholism in women. These bills were part of the Women's Health Equity Act. Morella's interest in women's health issues predates her involvement in politics. In 1974, as a professor of English and Philosophy at Montgomery College, Morella completed a study on alcoholism among middle class women for the National Council on Alcohol Education.

Morella has been active in international and human rights issues. In the U.S. Congress, she was the first woman to chair the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus. She served on the Executive Committee of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, and was a member of the Steering Committee of Congressional Friends of Human Rights. She represented the United States at the U.N. Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and co-chaired the congressional delegation to the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Morella was Chair of the Government Reform Subcommittee on the District of Columbia and was a long-time member of the House Science Committee and the Civil Service Subcommittee.

In 1994, Congresswoman Morella was inducted into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame. Glamour magazine honored her as "Woman of the Year" for fighting women's fights and winning. The New York Times recognized her as "one of a dozen who have risen to prominence fighting for women's health."

Morella and her husband, Tony, a law professor, have raised nine children, including her late sister's six children. The responsibility of raising a large family kept Morella directly in touch with the realities of American life. In 1980, she declared to a local newspaper, "If anybody understands the price of groceries, it has to be Morella." A resident of Montgomery County for 44 years, Morella lives in Bethesda.

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#### **SOURCES:**

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- [www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/whflist.html](http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/whflist.html)
- [www.house.gov/morella/biography.htm](http://www.house.gov/morella/biography.htm)